

# The Political Aesthetics of the Feminist Documentary Film

JULIA LESAGE

Feminist documentary filmmaking is a cinematic genre congruent with a political movement, the contemporary women's movement.<sup>1</sup> One of that movement's key forms of organization is the affinity group. In the late 1960s and early 1970s in the United States, women's consciousness-raising groups, reading groups, and task-oriented groups were emerging from and often superseded the organizations of the antiwar New Left. Women who had learned filmmaking in the antiwar movement and previously "uncommitted" women filmmakers began to make self-consciously Feminist films, and other women began to learn filmmaking specifically to contribute to the movement.<sup>2</sup> The films these people made came out of the same ethos as the consciousness-raising groups and had the same goals.

Clearly the cinematic sophistication and quality of political analysis vary from film to film, but aside from an in-depth discussion of *Self Health*, which I value both cinematically and politically, to explore such differences would be beyond the scope of this article. Here I shall describe the emergence of the Feminist documentary as a genre, the aesthetics, use, and importance of this genre, and its relation to the movement from which it sprang—a discussion important to any consideration of the aesthetics of political films.

Many of the first Feminist documentaries used a simple format to present to audiences (presumably composed primarily of women) a picture of the ordinary details of women's lives, their thoughts—told directly by the protagonists to the camera—and their frustrated but sometimes successful attempts to enter and deal with the public world of work and power. Among these films, which now have a wide circulation in libraries and schools, are *Growing Up Female* by Julia Reichert and Jim Klein, *Janie's Janie* by Geri Ashur, and *The Woman's Film* by the women of San Francisco Newsreel. Other films dealing with women talking about their lives include Kate Millet's *Three Lives*, Joyce Chopra's *Joyce at 34*, Donna Deitch's *Woman to Woman*, and Deborah Schaffer and Bonnie Friedman's

*Chris and Bernie*. Some films deal with pride in the acquisition of skills, such as Bonnie Friedman's film about a girl's track team, *The Flashettes*, or Michelle Citron's study of her sister learning the concert violin from a woman teacher, *Parthenogenesis*. Others have more political analysis and are often collective productions that provide a Feminist analysis of women's experience with the following: (a) prison (*Like a Rose* by Tomato Productions, *We're Alive* by California Institute for Women Video and UCLA Women's Film Workshop); (b) the health care system (*Self Health* by San Francisco Women's Health Collective, *Taking Our Bodies Back* by Margaret Lazarus, Renner Wunderlich, and Joan Fink, *The Chicago Maternity Center Story* by Kartemquin Films, and *Healthcaring* by Denise Bostrom and Jane Warrenbrand); and (c) rape (*Rape* by JoAnn Elam).

It is no coincidence that films about working-class women show their subjects as the most confident and militant about their rights in the public sector, and their willingness to fight for those rights. Yet even these films, from Madeline Anderson's *I am Somebody* to Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County, USA*, focus on problems of identity in the private sphere—how one strikeleader's husband views her union organizing unenthusiastically, or how miners' wives reach a new solidarity only by overcoming sexual suspicions and jealousies. As Feminist films explicitly demand that a new space be opened up for women in women's terms, the collective and social act of Feminist filmmaking has often led to entirely new demands in the areas of health care, welfare, poverty programs, work, and law (especially rape), and in the cultural sphere proper in the areas of art, education, and the mass media.

And if the Feminist filmmakers deliberately used a traditional "realist" documentary structure, it is because they saw making these films as an urgent public act and wished to enter the 16mm circuit of educational films especially through libraries, schools, churches, unions, and YWCAs to bring Feminist analysis to many women it might otherwise never reach.

Biography, simplicity, trust between woman filmmaker and woman subject, a linear narrative structure, little self-consciousness about the flexibility of the cinematic medium—these are what characterize the Feminist documentaries of the 1970s. The films' form and their widespread use raise certain questions. Why are they patterned in so similar a way? Why are these films the first ones thought of whenever a group of women decide they want to "start learning something about women" and set up showings in churches, public libraries, high schools, Girl Scout meetings, union caucuses, or rallies for the ERA? Why do activists in the women's movement use the same films over and over again? What is the films' appeal?

These films often show women in the private sphere getting together to define/redefine their experiences and to elaborate a strategy for making inroads on the public sphere. Either the filmmaker senses that it is socially necessary to name women's experience, or women together within the film do so, or a "strong" woman is filmed who shares her stance with the filmmaker and, by extension, with the women who see the film. Conversations in these films are not merely examples of female introspection; the filmmakers choose not to explore the corners of women's psyches (as in Romantic art). Rather, the women's very redefining of experience is intended to challenge all the previously accepted indices of "male superiority" and of women's supposedly "natural" roles. Women's personal explorations establish a structure for social and psychological change and are filmed specifically to combat patriarchy. The filmmaker's and her subjects' intent is political. Yet the films' very strength, the emphasis on the experiential, can sometimes be a political limitation, especially when the film limits itself to the individual and offers little or no analysis of sense of collective process leading to social change.<sup>4</sup>

#### Example: "Self Health"

Among Feminist documentaries, *Self Health* is an exemplary film in terms of its cinematic style, the knowledge it conveys, and the self-confidence and understanding it gives women about themselves. The film presents women in a group situation, collectively learning to do vaginal self-exams with a speculum, breast exams, and vaginal bimanual exams. Such groups have been conducted over the past five or six years by women who are part of an informal "self-help" or "self-health" movement in the United States; sometimes their work is connected with the home-birth movement and sometimes with pregnancy testing and abortion referral services. As the health care industry grows like a mushroom under capitalism, the general North American public has become more and more aware of the poor quality of the expensive services offered to them. The women in the self-health movement form part of a large, often informally constituted radical movement to improve health care delivery for the masses of people instead of for an elite.

The place where such a self-health session takes place is usually someone's home or a women's center, rather than a medical clinic. In the film *Self Health*, the locale is a sunny apartment or informal women's meeting place. Although we see two women giving most of the explanations and demonstrations, no one is distinguished as nurse or doctor. As important to the film as the conveying of anatomical information is the fact that all

the women discuss together their feelings about and experiences with their bodies and their sexuality, and that they very naturally look at and feel each others' bodies. To gain knowledge by looking at and feeling each other is acknowledged perhaps for the first time as woman's right.

Such a film attacks both the artistic and medical tradition of viewing women's bodies. These traditions, as well as the mass media's use of women's image to sell consumer goods, have robbed most women of a real knowledge of both their own and other women's bodies. Furthermore, many women have little personal sense of rightfully possessing their own bodies, little sense of what's "normal" for themselves physically, and little sense of what sexuality on their terms or on women's terms in general might mean.

Toward the end of the film, one of the women puts on a rubber glove to demonstrate how to do a bimanual vaginal exam. The subject is a woman lying on a table in a sunny room with a flowered pillow under head and a green fern near her. The "teacher" inserts two lubricated fingers into the vagina and pushes up underneath the cervix. First she shows the woman being examined and then the other women gathered around the table, how to press down hard on the abdomen to ascertain the size and location of the uterus and then the ovaries. "Why does it always hurt when the doctor does it?" they ask. They also express surprise about the size and location of the uterus ("about the size of a walnut") and the ovaries ("feels like a Mexican jumping bean").

Women watching the film usually find this information about the uterus completely new. Medical textbook drawings have traditionally shown the uterus as big and near the navel, with large fallopian tubes winding around prominent ovaries. The clitoris, until Masters' and Johnson's studies, was not "taught" in medical school as women's organ of sexual sensation. Although I was raised in a doctor's family, I faced similar ignorance, for I learned only three years ago—after having a vaginal cyst cauterized without any local anesthesia—what was to me a startling fact, that the vagina has relatively little sensation because there are few nerve endings there. Why, women are asking, has such ignorance about women's sexuality been promoted in our society—especially since both pornography and modern medicine pretend to be so liberal about sex?

Doctors, male lovers, photographers, artists, and filmmakers have taken woman's nude body as their "turf," especially as an *object* of study. John Berger, in his film series and book, *Ways of Seeing*, has described the tradition of female nudity in oil painting and the presentation of women's bodies in advertising. He understands how the fact that women are "an object of vision, a sight," has affected women's view of themselves:

women constantly "survey" themselves to judge how they appear, to try to gain some kind of control over how they might be treated in a circumscribed, patriarchal world.

In the art-form of the European nude, the painters and spectator-owners were usually men, the persons treated as objects, women. . . . The essential way of seeing women, the essential use of which images are put, has not changed.<sup>5</sup>

In the film *Self Health*, one of the instructors relates how she attacked the depersonalization a woman feels when her body is an "object," especially as she experienced it during a gynecological exam:

This summer I went to have the regular pap smear and pelvic exam. As soon as I got into the stirrups, the whole feeling came back. I really remembered it and felt completely vulnerable and terrified. There was like this miner's cap sticking up, and finally I said, "OK. I have to deal with this some way," and I just took the curtain and tore it off and threw it into the garbage can. It really blew his mind. He said, "You know, I never thought how ominous it is to see the head of this person, and this part of you divided, not yours."

That so much of the basic physical information conveyed by the film is very new for women viewers (e.g., the film lets us see the cervix and the os, or the normal sebaceous secretion from the nipple) indicates just how colonized a space women's bodies still are. *Self Health* goes a long way toward reconquering that space.

Cinematically, the film is characterized by its presentation of women in a collective situation sharing new knowledge about their physical sexuality. About fifteen young women are gathered in a friendly, mundane environment rather than in a clinical white office where the woman patient is completely isolated from her ordinary social context. As the group does breast self-examinations together, they sit around in a circle in what might be a living room; hanging on the wall we see a Toulouse-Lautrec reproduction of a woman. Warm brown-red and pink tones predominate. As the women remove their tops, we notice them as individuals—some with rings and other jewels, some with glasses, many with different hair-styles. The group is young, they look like students or young working-women in flowered peasant blouses and dresses, shirts and jeans. In sum, the colors and the *mise en scène* create a sense of warmth, intimacy, and friendliness.

Even more important to the *mise en scène* is the women's collectivity. Women look at and touch each other; they all see their own sexual organs and those of others, probably for the first time. They learn the variety of

physical types and the range of "normality" in sexual organs in look, color, texture, and feel. The fact that almost any woman would feel shy and embarrassed about doing such an overt exploration is mitigated by these women's doing it in a group where everyone feels the same way. The women realize that their fears and doubts about their bodies do not originate from their individual situation as much as from women's physical and psychological "colonization" under patriarchy. Too often, women have experienced as degrading getting contraception information, having a gynecological exam, and having a baby. Certainly at those moments, women's ignorance about their bodies was rarely dispelled. But this collective process gives them the self-confidence to demand answers from doctors face to face and to demand a different kind of health care overall. That such a film does not provide an institutional analysis of the health-care industry, as does *The Chicago Maternity Center Story*, limits how much this one film can achieve in directly promoting a different kind of health care for women; yet, because of the wide range of discussion and kinds of challenges to the established order it encourages women to formulate, it is useful in a wide range of women's struggles.

Visually and in terms of its overall structure, the film moves as far away as you can get from pornography, yet the cinematography also captures that kind of nervous tension and excitement of discovery which the women themselves undoubtedly felt. The film opens on a close up of naked skin, the surface moving to the rhythm of a woman's breathing; there is a pan to a breast and a shot of either pubic or axillary hair in close up. As it starts out, the film could be porn. For most women audience members, the initial sequence provides a moment of tension—"Do we dare to or want to look at this?" The voice over assures us of what we want to hear: "We're learning from our bodies, teaching ourselves and each other how each of us is unique . . . and the same . . . We see it as reclaiming lost territory that belonged to our doctors, our husbands, everyone but us." As the title comes on, we hear the excited voices of women speaking all at once, a device also used at the end of the film over the credits. The voices of discovery, talking in a simultaneous outburst or sharing observations, needs and experiences—these are the tension-breaking devices, the part of the film that an audience unfamiliar with such a situation first identifies with. And these voices imply an outburst of discussion that cannot be contained, that begs to be continued after the film is seen.

In an early sequence, a woman lying on a table is surrounded by other women as she talks about and demonstrates the external genitalia, using her own body as a model. Various women talk here about their sense of being at a distance from their own sexual parts, of feeling squeamish about

them. Alternating shots show close ups of the demonstration of faces looking intently at what they are being shown. When the woman on the table demonstrates the use of the speculum and inserts it into her vagina, one woman's voice exclaims, "Oh, God!" which elicits nervous laughter in the audience and expresses the group's tension. As the woman inserts the speculum and shines the light inside it, the camera cuts to another angle and zooms in to show her cervix and its opening, the os, that which the doctor always "examines" but which we never see. Laughter and sounds of excitement are heard as the onlooking women comment and ask questions about what they see.

After this sequence, a high-angle long shot shows three women lying on the floor against pillows and sleeping bags propped up against the wall. Their legs are spread apart and they are all doing vaginal self-exams with speculum, flashlight, and mirror. A pan shot shows the whole group of women on the floor, lined up along the wall, doing the same thing with some women looking at or helping each other. A mixture of voices exclaim and comment on what they see, especially on the variety and uniqueness of the genitalia. This sequence is a first in narrative cinema. It decolonizes women's sexuality. Women occupy the whole space of the frame as subjects in a collective act of mutual, tangible self-exploration. As one of my students said of this sequence, "It has none of the 'Wow!' of *Candid Camera* and none of the distance of medical or so-called sex education films." Particularly in this one section of *Self Health*, women filmmakers have found a way to show and define women's sexuality on their terms—not with the thrill of possession and not with objectification, but with the excitement of coming to knowledge.

Later, as the film shows the women doing breast self-exams together, they and we notice and let ourselves deliberately look at the variety of women's breasts. The women themselves feel each others' breasts to learn what normal breast tissue is like. Although the Cancer Society promotes breast self-examination, women's breast tissue is fibrous and also varies with the menstrual cycle and the individual. As a result, women often do not know what is normal or what a "lump" might be. A doctor can spot such phenomena from having had the opportunity to feel many women's breasts. Why should such knowledge not be made available to, or seized by, women themselves?

The anatomy lesson, the sharing of feelings, and the learning about others are all part of the self-health experience and all have equal importance in the film. Close ups demonstrate specific examination techniques or show individuals talking and listening; long shots convey the sense of a communal experience in the self-health group. No woman is filmed as an

object; everyone is a subject who combines and presents physical, emotional, intellectual, and political selves. The women filmed have an amazing spontaneity and lack of self-consciousness about the camera, particularly given the close range at which the filming was done.

Self-health groups and this film itself both function in an explicitly political way. Reclaiming "the lost territory" of women's bodies and health care is a personal act that has a strong effect on women's identity, emotional life, and sense of control. This film also directly attacks the medical establishment. Women who see the film immediately want to talk about two things—sex education and health care—mainly in terms of what patriarchal society lacks.

In one sense, the film is utopian. It shows a new, collective form of women learning together. It would be an ideal film, for example, to show in high schools. But when I showed the film on the university level to women's studies classes and to film students, both sets of students agreed that the idea of such a collective form of learning about sexuality would have been viewed as "pornography" in their high schools by the teachers, the school boards, and many of the parents. In cinematic terms, the film's vision of women's sexuality, of their being total subjects to one another and to the audience, is also utopian. Women's very physical presence is defined here in women's terms, collectively. And some might ask, in referring to documentary film alone, why haven't these images and these concepts of women's united physical and intellectual selves been presented by filmmakers before?

### FEMINIST DOCUMENTARIES AND THE CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING GROUP

*Cinéma vérité* documentary filmmaking had features that made it an attractive and useful mode of artistic and political expression for women learning filmmaking in the late 1960s. It not only demanded less mastery of the medium than Hollywood or experimental film, but also the very documentary recording of women's real environments. Their stories immediately established and valorized a new order of cinematic iconography, connotations, and range of subject matter in the portrayal of women's lives. Furthermore, contemporary Feminist filmmakers, often making biographical or autobiographical films, have used *cinéma vérité* in a new and different way. They often identify personally with their subjects. Their relation to that subject while filming often is collaborative, with both subject and filmmaker sharing the political goals of the project. The Feminist

documentarist uses the film medium to convey a new and heightened sense of what *woman* means or can mean in our society—this new sense of female identity being expressed both through the subject's story and through the tangible details of the subject's milieu.

Yet why do so many Feminist filmmakers choose to film the same thing? Film after film shows a woman telling her story to the camera. It is usually a woman struggling to deal with the public world. It seems that these Feminist documentarists just plug in different speakers and show a certain variation in milieu—especially in class terms—from the aristocratic home of *Nana, Mom, and Me* by Amalie Rothschild to the union organizers' photos of their younger days in *Union Maids* by Julia Reichert and Jim Klein. In fact, the Feminist documentaries have as a narrative structure a pattern that is as satisfying for activists in the contemporary women's movement to watch as it is for women just wanting to learn more about women. That is, these films evince a consistent organization of narrative materials that functions much like a deep structure, the details of the individual women's lives providing the surface structure of these films.<sup>6</sup>

Such an organization serves a specific social and psychological function at this juncture in history. It is the artistic analogue of the structure and function of the consciousness-raising group. Furthermore, it indicates to the filmmaker a certain reason to be making the film, a certain relation to her subject matter and to the medium, and a certain sense of the function of the film once released. The narrative deep structure sets the filmmaker in a mutual, nonhierarchical relation with her subject (such filming is not seen as the male artist's act of "seizing" the subject and then presenting one's "creation") and indicates what she hopes her relation to her audience will be.<sup>7</sup>

The major political tool of the contemporary women's movement has been the consciousness-raising group. Self-consciously, a group of about a dozen women would reevaluate any and all areas of their past experiences in terms of how that experience defined or illuminated what it meant to be a woman in our culture. It was an act of naming previously unarticulated knowledge, of seeing that knowledge as political (i.e., as a way of beginning to change power relations), and of understanding that the power of this knowledge was that it was arrived at collectively. This collective process served to break down a sense of guilt for one's own problems and provided a sense of mutual support and of the collective's united strength and potential for action. It was and is a political act carried out in the private sphere.

Initially, there is a healing in the very act of naming and understanding women's general oppression in collectively creating this new knowledge

and identity. Then, the group usually elaborates specific strategies to make inroads on, help its individual members enter, and change power relations in the public sphere. They may, for example, discuss tactics for helping one of their members to say no to making coffee at work or to demand that the department hire a woman in an executive position. They may strive to get gynecological services at a school clinic. They may help a member of the group insist at work that no more clerical staff be hired and that all women be upgraded, which would mean that everyone in the office do both writing and typing. But consciousness-raising groups cannot be idealized as revolutionary structures. Their problems have been well analyzed by women who have used them and learned how much more organization and economic power is needed to make major changes in the public sphere.<sup>8</sup>

In many ways—for Feminists and all the rest of the women in the United States—the private sector of society is uniquely women's space. In that private space, the home, women of my mother's generation were systematically robbed of their sense of being the possessors of their own bodies. Throughout patriarchy, women have been men's possession and the reflection of men's desires in the sexual act, especially in marriage. Mothers are the child-bearers and self-sacrifiers, which is the constant theme of soap operas and domestic melodramas in film. The sense of self for women under capitalism has traditionally had to come from their children, their house, their jewelry, and their clothes. All the physical, peripheral extensions of themselves that they've been allowed to "possess" has been a mock analog of the real patriarchal possession of themselves, their families, and the sources of economic power that they and their families have had to depend on.<sup>9</sup>

In testimony to the psychological condition of living out one's life in a state of mental colonization and in a sphere where one's labor is not valorized socially by either a salary or public power, many women's narratives are about identity, madness, and the fluidity or fragmentation of woman's ego. Yet the very act of writing a diary, of writing poems, or of consulting a neighbor woman about how to get along when times are hard—all these are testimonies to the struggle women wage to create a language, to formulate a stable sense of self, and to survive economic dependency on men. Just as women's domestic labor and way of relating to each other are disdained, so too their forms of resistance in that sphere tend to go unnoticed and unvalorized in a world where the hegemonic male culture, the public culture, has established the socially acknowledged "rules," appropriated women's bodies, and institutionalized the modes of discourse, especially through the Church, education, literature, the medical profession, the law, and the state.

Because women's identity is shaped and sustained in a sphere where men are largely absent, and because girls grow up in an emotional continuum with their mothers and the other women in their intimate environment (unlike a boy's Oedipal development), their emotional ties are deep to other women.<sup>10</sup> Women have traditionally constantly consulted with each other about domestic matters. One of the functions of the consciousness-raising group of the contemporary women's movement is to use an older form of subcultural resistance, women's conversation, in a new way. There is a knowledge that is already there about domestic life, but it has not necessarily been spoken in uncolonized, women-identified terms. Women's art, especially the Feminist documentary films, like consciousness-raising groups, strive to find a new way of speaking about what we have collectively known to be really there in the domestic sphere and to wrest back our identity there in women's terms.

### **A Shift in Iconography**

Much has been lost in women's iconography as it has been purveyed in films, advertising, and television. We have, in fact, maintained a rich photographic history of women over the last hundred years, yet this source is not tapped in its richness and variety in patriarchal narrative film. For example, the women that Dorothea Lange photographed do not "speak" to us either visually or verbally in mainstream cinema. In the United States in the early 1900s, many strikes were led by workingwomen dressed in their best clothes and striding down city streets arm in arm. Why did that iconography get lost?

In the cinematic portrayal of contemporary life, we must question how the details of childrearing, women's crafts, and women's intellectual endeavors are or are not presented in films, news, or ads. We rarely see media images that match the variety of clothes that women wear in daily life, women's varieties of weight and age and tone of voice or accent, and women's varieties of gesture according to their mood and the specific moment in their lives. The patriarchal visual iconography of female figures in film includes the following: mother, child, virago, granny (varient, old maid), ingenue, good wife, and siren. Good wives are blonde, sirens dark haired; erotically eligible figures of both sexes are slender and not yet old. An occasional comic figure escapes the classification by body type. Women's gestures in cinema are rigidly codified, and women's *mise en scène* predetermined by the connotative requirements of a previously established narrative scheme.

There are both psychological and economic reasons why the domestic world is devalued in our culture.<sup>11</sup> It is rarely seen or interpreted by hegemonic patriarchal culture for what it is and contains, and its elements are named and defined primarily within the context of a seemingly powerless women's subculture. The domestic sphere, except in melodrama, is rarely depicted in film as an interesting place or the locus of socially significant, multiple, interpersonal relationships. Rather, the domestic sphere is the place where a woman is possessed and a man possesses a woman, a man's castle, a place that the woman clings to. Feature films often judge the woman in the home as narrow, as having a stance morally inferior to the male protagonist's commitment to public duty; or home may become the projection backward to the security and presumed moral strength of the mother, regained through an alliance with a good wife. The home is out of history; cinematic heroes go out into the public sphere to do whatever it is that makes them the hero.

Connotative elements in cinema—here the connotative aspect of film's portrayal of the domestic sphere—are shaped both according to a film's narrative and to what people already know and have seen and experienced.<sup>12</sup> What the elements of the domestic sphere suggest is already conventionalized, already thought about before it gets in a film. But traditional filmmaking has drawn very narrowly even from the pool of conventional knowledge about domestic life.

One of the self-appointed tasks of contemporary Feminist art is to articulate, expand, and comment on women's own subcultural codification of the connotations of those visual elements and icons familiar to them in their private sphere. Thus, painter Judy Chicago paints "cunt" flowers, and other artists, notably sculptors, have elaborated sculptures or artifacts of paper crafts, sewing, quilting, feathers, enclosed spaces and cubicles, and family photos, such materials being used for the suggestive value they bear from the domestic sphere.

For Feminist writers and filmmakers, autobiography and biography provide an essential tool for looking in a self-conscious way at women's subculture, their role in or exclusion from the public sphere, their fantasy life, their sense of "embeddedness" in a certain object world. In other words, they become the way both back and forward toward naming and describing what woman really is, in that political and artistic act that Adrienne Rich calls "diving into the wreck."

Feminist films look at familiar women's elements to define them in a new, uncolonized way. Among the connotative elements to which Feminist documentaries draw our attention and give an added complexity are the visual cues that define womanliness in film. The women characters'

gestures, clothes age, weight, sexual preference, race, class, embeddedness in a specific social milieu elicit our reflection on both the specificity of the subjects' and our own lives, and on the difference between these cinematic representations and those of dominant cinema. As a result of these films, a much broader range of and more forceful and complex women characters now engage our interest as cinematic subjects, and they are shown doing a wider range of activities in greater detail than ever before in narrative cinema. The biographical documentary serves as a critique of and antidote to past cinematic depictions of women's lives and women's space.

In the film *Self Health*, two whole areas of visual imagery are challenged: the portrayal of women's sexuality and nudity, and health care. Domestic space in this film becomes the locus for a collective coming to knowledge about women's bodies and simultaneously the locus for a new kind of health care delivery. *The Chicago Maternity Center Story*, contrasting home delivery with hospital care, valorizes the same iconic contrasts: health care at home is more "human."

### **Talking Heads/ New Rules of the Game**

The visual portrayal of the women in Feminist documentaries is often criticized for its transparency (film's capturing reality) or for the visual dullness of talking heads. Yet the stories that the filmed women tell are not just "slices of experience." These stories serve a function aesthetically in reorganizing women viewers' expectations derived from patriarchal narratives and in initiating a critique of those narratives. The female figures talking to us on the screen in *Janie's Janie*, *Joyce at 34*, *Union Maids*, *Three Lives*, *The Woman's Film*, and *We're Alive* are not just characters whom we encounter as real-life individuals. Rather, the filmmakers have clearly valorized their subjects' words and edited their discourse. In all the Feminist documentaries, the sound track, usually told in the subjects' own words, serves the function of rephrasing, criticizing, or articulating for the first time the rules of the game as they have been and as they should be for women.

The sound track of the Feminist documentary film often consists almost entirely of women's self-conscious, heightened, intellectual discussion of role and sexual politics. The film gives voice to that which had in the media been spoken for women by patriarchy. Received notions about women give way to an outpouring of real desires, contradictions, decisions, and social analyses. After I showed Kate Millett's *Three Lives* to an

introductory film class in 1972, a woman student came up to me gratefully after class and commented, "I'll bet that's the first time a lot of those guys have had to sit and listen uninterruptedly to women talking for ninety minutes. I wonder what it means to them to listen to women without having the chance to butt in and have their say."

More than what it means for men to listen to women's self-consciously told "stories," what has it meant for us women in the course of the contemporary women's movement—what have we learned? We have learned what our sexuality is, how mothers can hate and need and love their children, how we can tell a boss or a lover or a friend or a sexist fool off, how "it's not our fault," and where our personal struggles are located in and contribute to and are supported by the larger forces that define our historical period. These films both depict and encourage a politicized "conversation" among women; and in these films, the self-conscious act of telling one's story as a woman in a politicized yet personal way gives the older tool of women's subcultural resistance, conversation, a new social force as a tool for liberation.

### Contribution to Public Struggle

The Feminist documentaries speak to workingwomen, encourage them in their public struggles, and broaden their horizons to make demands in other spheres as well. To define structures of patriarchy is as important to women workers as to define structures of capitalism. An existential or gut-level militancy becomes refined by a political movement that offers an analysis of and provides a way for seeing both the parameters and details of the struggle as a whole. Yet because of male competitiveness, aggressiveness and bluff are not skills women learn as children (and many women do not necessarily want to learn these tactics as adults either); the women's movement seeks to create new structures to facilitate women's entry into the public sphere of work and power, and to make that public sphere one they would want to inhabit.

Clearly, the powerless will want power, especially once they specifically define the ways they have systematically been robbed of it. But women also want to imagine what that power would be if executed in a form commensurate with Feminist goals. Although it is seemingly filmed in domestic space, *Self Health* is a powerful public document in the model for sex education and the vision of collective, community control that it presents. And its sense of women together, coming to (creating, seizing) knowledge is subversive. As one of my women students said, in a single-sex discussion

we had after the film and which became an outpouring of women's concerns, "My mother is a liberal and thinks children and adolescents should have sex education. But where she'd accept a film showing a nurse or doctor examining a woman, she'd be horrified to see this one where women are doing it in a group."

JoAnn Elam's *Rape* represents perhaps a new trend in Feminist documentaries.<sup>13</sup> Coming out of an experimental film tradition, Elam uses both Brechtian intertitles and a symbolic iconography intercut with a video transfer of a conversation she taped with rape victims one night in one of the women's apartment. The women's conversation forms the sound track of the film, and Elam both heightens and comments wittily on their points by repeating some of their lines in the intertitles. The film is an angry one that elaborates a whole new film style adequate to treating the subject of rape with neither titillation nor pathos. The women filmed are impassioned and intellectual. They are discussing their experiences with the group's support and within the security of domestic space; most of them are political activists in organizations against rape, and all saw the making of this film as an explicitly public act. The Feminist documentary films articulate a vision, in part being realized now, of what the shift in relations in the public sphere would be and how power would be enacted if women were to gain and use power in a Feminist way.

The Feminist documentaries represent a use of, yet a shift in, the aesthetics of *cinéma vérité* due to the filmmakers' close identification with their subjects, participation in the women's movement, and sense of the films' intended effect. The structure of the consciousness-raising group becomes the deep structure repeated over and over in these films. Within such a narrative structure, either a single woman tells her story to the filmmaker or a group of women are filmed sharing experiences in a politicized way. They are filmed in domestic space, and their words serve to redefine that space in a new, "woman-identified" way. Either the stance of the people filmed or the stance of the film as a whole reflects a commitment to changing the public sphere as well; and for this reason, these filmmakers have used an accessible documentary form. In the "surface structure" of the films, a new iconography of women's bodies and women's space emerges that implicitly challenges the general visual depiction of women in Capitalist society, perhaps in many Socialist ones, too. The sound tracks have women's voices speaking continuously; and the films' appeal lies not only in having strong women tell about their lives but even more in our hearing and having demonstrated that some women have deliberately altered the rules of the game of sexual politics. All *cinéma vérité* is not the same, and much of the current discussion of and attack on cinematic

realism dismisses the kind of documentary film style that most people are used to. If one looks closely at the relation of this politicized genre to the movement it is most intimately related to, we can see how both the exigencies and forms of organization of an ongoing political movement can affect the aesthetics of documentary film.

*Julia Lesage is an Associate Editor of *Jump Cut* and is currently working on two book-length projects: one on Feminist documentaries and the other on late Godard.*

### Notes

1. This article is part of a book-length project on the presentation of women's bodies and women's space in contemporary documentary film.
2. Many of the Feminist documentaries (I have given only a representative list of them) are described briefly in Linda Artel's and Susan Wengraf's *Positive Images: Non-Sexist Films for Young People* (San Francisco: Booklegger Press, 1976). Interviews with Feminist filmmakers often appear alongside reviews of their films in *Jump Cut*.
3. Experimental filmmaking techniques or an innovative "stretching" of the cinéma vérité form are particularly well used in JoAnn Elam's *Rape*, Michelle Citron's *Parthenogenesis*, and the collectively produced *We're Alive*.
4. An activist in health care struggles criticizes the political analyses offered in Feminist health care films in Marcia Rothenberg's "Good Vibes vs. Preventive Medicine: Healthcaring From our End of the Speculum," *Jump Cut*, No. 17 (April, 1978), p. 3.
5. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York: The Viking Press, 1973), pp. 63-64.
6. Such an idea loosely derives from the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss in *Structural Anthropology*, trans. C. Jacobson and B. G. Schoepf (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1967).
7. Cinéma vérité films in the United States made by male filmmakers are characterized precisely by the film's ironic distance from the subject and the filmmaker's presentation of his vision of the subject as his "creation." Films by Frederick Wiseman, Richard Leacock, David Pennebaker, Tom Palazzolo, and the Maysles brothers fall in this category.
8. For an extended discussion of consciousness-raising groups, see Jo Freeman, *The Politics of Women's Liberation* (New York: David McKay, 1975).
9. For a consideration of these issues—women's "dispossession," their loss of a sense of self, and their role in the domestic sphere—see the following: Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (New York: Bantam, 1975); Ti-Grace Atkinson, "The Institution of Sexual Intercourse," *Amazon Odyssey* (New York: Links Books, 1971); Charles Kleinhans, "Notes on Melodrama and the Family under Capitalism" (contains useful bibliography), *Film Reader*, No. 3 (1978); Laura Mulvey, "Douglas Sirk and Melodrama," and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "Minelli and Melodrama," *The Australian Journal of Film Theory*, No. 3 (1977).

10. Nancy Chodorow, "Mothering, Object-Relations and the Female Oedipal Configuration," *Feminist Studies*, 4, No. 1, (February 1978); "Family Structure and Feminine Personality," *Woman, Culture and Society*, Michelle Rosaldo and Lois Lamphere, eds. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974); "Oedipal Assymetries and Heterosexual Knots," *Social Problems*, 23, No. 4 (April 1976).
11. Sheila Rowbotham, *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1973); Eli Zaretsky, *Capitalism, the Family, and Personal Life* (New York: Harper, 1976); Juliet Mitchell, *Woman's Estate* (New York: Pantheon, 1971).
12. Lesage, "S/Z and *Rules of the Game*," *Jump Cut*, No. 12/13 (1976).
13. This discussion is drawn from a paper on the film *Rape*, which I delivered at the 1978 Purdue Conference on Film Studies and which will be published in a forthcoming issue of *Jump Cut*.